December is a Busy Month for Avid Gardeners (published 2026-12-12)
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Garlic – There's Still Time to Plant

In the 10-10-2026 newspaper, Gus told you all about planting garlic. If you didn't get around to it yet, there's still time! As a refresher, here are Gus' tips for planting: "Success starts with proper bed preparation and basic geometry. Work compost and a balanced fertilizer into well-drained soil before planting. Separate your garlic bulb into individual cloves right before planting, keeping the papery husk on each piece. Push each clove two inches deep into the soil with the flat root end facing down and the pointed tip pointing toward the sky. Space the cloves six inches apart in rows spaced twelve inches apart. Cover the entire bed with three inches of straw or leaf mulch to insulate the soil and suppress winter weeds."

Plant Your Live Christmas Tree

If you buy a live tree with a root ball, you can plant it outside. Plan ahead as to where you want the tree and dig the hole before the ground freezes. Cover the hole with mulch to prevent freezing. After the holidays, move the tree to a cool place to readapt to the cold, then after a few days, plant it. Cover heavily with mulch to allow roots to settle in the unfrozen soil.

Prune a Few Things

Some shrubs really love to be pruned in December. To encourage stronger growth in spring, prune coralberry and snowberry. St. John's wort and several species of spirea also do better with a winter trim. If you have a fig tree, winter is a great time to trim it back, too. While you're at it, trim a few pieces of evergreen for a porch decoration.

Keep Feeding the Compost

It's always time to add to the compost heap. The materials break down slower in the cold, but the magic still happens. Adding insulation to the outside and top of the bin will help keep the contents warmer and composting will be a bit faster. A black plastic bag of leaves or a bale of straw around the outside of the bin is great insulation. If you have extra leaves, pile them on top of the compost. Then any food scraps you have can be placed under the blanket of leaves to keep composting cooking. Another tip to hasten decomposition – chop everything up into smaller pieces. They will break down faster.

Cover Your Carrots

Carrots can be left in the ground all winter and taste even better when they feel a chill from a frosty day. Cover the carrots with a row cover, tunnel or about 6 inches of mulch to keep them warm and to help keep the ground around them from freezing solid.

Mulch It

When strawberries are dormant, add a nice layer of mulch to help them get through the winter. The same goes for blueberries. Once dormant, about 6 inches of mulch will help them survive a strong cold snap.

Test Your Seeds

Take a sample of 10 to 20 seeds to see how many germinate. The paper towel method is the simplest. Spread the seeds over a damp paper towel, cover with another damp paper towel, then place it in a plastic bag to prevent drying out. Store as appropriate for the seed type. After a couple of days, check to see how many germinated. Moldy seeds are considered a failure. Calculate the percentage to decide if the seeds are worth sowing next year.

Take Care of Tools and Equipment

Your hand tools will be happier and last longer if they are cleaned and oiled for their winter vacation. Any mowers or tillers need a good cleaning and oil change, too. Hand tools and mower blades can dull with use, so sharpening them will ensure they are ready for the challenges next year brings.

After all this, sit down, put your feet up and enjoy perusing seed catalogs, gardening magazines and gardening shows on TV.

Resources

"How to Care for Your Farm-Grown Christmas Tree," https://realchristmastrees.org/all-about-trees/care-tips/

"Winter Composting," https://yates.cce.cornell.edu/resources/compost-winter-composting

"The Prize Lives Underground – Growing Carrots,"
https://extension.illinois.edu/gardening/carrots

"Tennessee Home Fruit and Vegetable Garden W436 2026 CALENDAR,"
https://uthort.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/228/2025/12/W436-2026-edition.pdf

"Plant Propagation: Seed Germination Test," https://allegany.cce.cornell.edu/gardening/plant-propagation-seed-germination-test

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT's YouTube site for helpful videos:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ

Or Washington County's YouTube site:
https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.